

Keeping Your Customers Happy

A Customer Service Refresher

Elizabeth A. Lunch

Happy customers = paycheck.

What do program managers, professional sports teams, doctors, and circus clowns have in common? That's right! Customers! Unless you're a professional (or even amateur) hermit, you deal with customers. You need them to keep you and/or your organization in business, which in turn gives you a paycheck.


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If you keep your customers happy, you'll have repeat business and repeat paychecks. Does this sound like a plan?

Who Are Your Customers?

Have you, as a program manager (PM) or supervisor, thought about who your customers are? You may not realize it, but you have customers internal to your organization. Your boss, your boss's boss, your peers, your teammates, your secretary, the phone guy, the janitor—everyone with whom you come into daily contact. Keeping internal customers happy will give you untold dividends. You may never know how you change someone's life through your little niceties, but someone, somewhere will. It's the concerned listening to someone's problem, the "Hey, how's it going?" or the box of candy you brought in for everyone for no special reason that garner good will.

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Your external customers are, of course, those people or organizations with whom you do tangible business—the receivers of your products and/or services. How do you treat these people? Maybe you're not thrilled to have to deal with Col. Blowhard from NAGCOM, but since he funds half of your budget, you'd better practice your happy dance (or at least project an enthused voice) when he calls.

Every Customer is Your Favorite Customer

Treat each customer as if he or she is your favorite customer. Put enthusiasm in your voice when Favorite Customer calls you for the 75th time in a week asking where his document or her training device is. It's tough to be cheerful all the time, but put your best attitude out there. Nobody wants to deal with a cranky, grouchy, bad-asp (you know, Cleo's snake) attitude. Remember that happy dance? (By the way, if a customer's called 75 times, what did you do after the other 74 calls to resolve the problem?)

Never say "never," "no," "can't be done," "it's policy," "it's against the rules," "you're wrong," "well, duh," or anything of that ilk to the customer. Find a positive way to state negatives. You may *want* to say, "You can't direct us to give you that report at the end of the month (our busiest time) and expect us to jump right on it. Whaddya think we are—your personal staff?" But instead, in your most professional, dulcet tones, you *do* say something like,

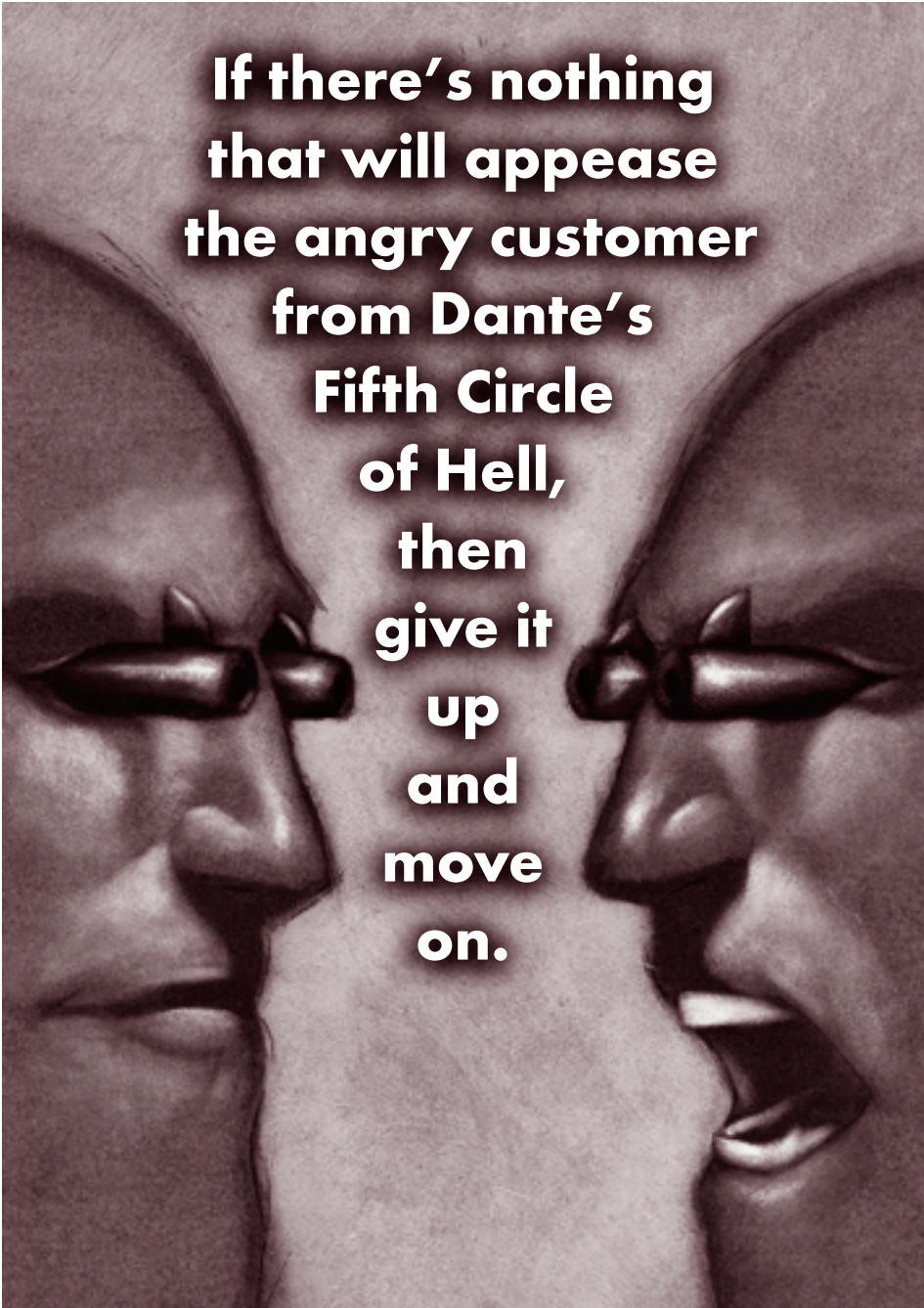
"Though it will be difficult to prepare that report quickly because of end-of-the-month obligations, I will try to rearrange the workload and see if we can't accommodate you as quickly as possible." Then do your best. And, of course, never promise anything you can't deliver.

Remember what two-year olds are taught. Say "please," "thank you," and "you're welcome," however much of a hurry you're in. Everyone appreciates courtesy, especially paying customers, and the least you can do is say "thank you" as you whisk their money away to the company coffers.

Take soft skills refresher training frequently, even if you are the company instructor. Soft skills are the "make nice with the customer" abilities that can make or break your business. Call the customer by name, offer a cup of coffee, and chat informally for a few minutes.

Watch What You Say

Consider generational and knowledge gaps as you communicate with a variety of customers. To the battle command director, the 22-year-old software engineer on your team may be speaking gibberish even though he's probably perfectly understandable to another engineer. As the PM, make sure communication is occurring. Check eyeballs often for that deer-in-the-headlights stare of incomprehension.



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Always look your customer in the eye, and pay attention to what's being said. Don't let your gaze or your mind wander—and keep an eye on your teammates. You really don't want your logistician, Ralph, to say, when asked if you can ship 20,000 collimators overnight from Pomona to the Horn of Africa, via Fort Drum, “No problem,” because he just zoned out from Planet Earth and you didn't notice.

Never criticize anyone on your team to anyone inside or outside the organization. Why? Because that dunce Crystal might be Uncle Fred's favorite niece. And the person you're talking to might play golf with Uncle Fred. And Uncle Fred could be Gen. Fred at the post where you're

trying to get new or continued business. It may well be that Crystal has an IQ that would rival that of a turnip (no maligning of turnips intended), but keep your opinion to yourself.

The Customer from the Black Lagoon

There will be times when you just can't please a customer. The product wasn't right, the report wasn't written quickly enough, it rained the day the device was installed, your suit was garish, Mars wasn't aligned with Jupiter—whatever. You've apologized and tried to make amends. Nothing worked.

As a manager, you know that your people are your most valuable asset. With your talented staff, you should be able to get more business, but it's hard to replace dedicated workers. If there's nothing that will appease the angry customer from Dante's Fifth Circle of Hell, then give it up and move on. Your people are more important.

Keep a record of your best and worst customer experiences. Analyze how they could have been better handled (even the successes). Make a “lessons learned” file on your company's intranet that's available to all of your staff. Frequently update the file with new situations, and try to ensure there are no repeat

problems. If Ralph is still promising ridiculous things to customers because he'd rather be bungee jumping, then help him jump on out the door.

Nothing Personal

Remember, it's just business—it's not personal. Whether you work alone or are part of a team, you're a professional who can deal with anyone the business throws at you. Keeping customers happy isn't always an easy job, but it can be less difficult if you keep a cheerful, can-do demeanor and treat them as you would treat yourself.

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